Research article

Unpacking the parallel effects of parental alcohol misuse and low income on risk of supervisory neglect☆

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ABSTRACT

Although low income status and parent alcohol misuse are considered critical risk factors for child neglect, little is known about the mechanisms of this association. No known research has assessed the parallel effect of each on occurrence of child neglect. This study aimed to explore the direct and indirect effects of parent alcohol misuse and low family income on risk of supervisory neglect through mediating factors such as parent depressive symptoms and low social support.

The study used a sample of 2990 parents of children under 13 years old who completed a listed telephone survey conducted in 50 mid-sized cities within California during 2009. We used a structural equation model to estimate the direct and indirect effects of parent alcohol misuse (defined as heavy drinking frequency) and low family income on supervisory neglect toward a focal child, as well as the indirect effect via parental depressive symptoms and low social support. Mediation analysis to capture direct, indirect, and total effects of these two independent variables was also conducted.

Results revealed a significant direct effect of low family income on likelihood of supervisory neglect. Low income also exhibited an indirect effect via increased depressive symptoms and low social support. Annual frequency of heavy drinking showed no direct effect on supervisory neglect likelihood, but an indirect effect was observed via increased depressive symptoms and decreased social support. Parent low income and high frequency heavy drinking likely increase risks for supervisory neglect through distinct pathways. Longitudinal research is needed to confirm the pathways identified within this study.

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1. Introduction

Seventy-five percent of children identified as being maltreated in 2014 experienced some form of neglect (US DHHS, 2016). Supervisory neglect is consistently identified as the most common form of neglect in general population and child welfare samples (Hussey, Chang, & Kotch, 2006; Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Zhou, 2013; Mennen et al., 2010 Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010; Ruiz-Casares, Trocme, & Fallon, 2012). It is defined as "when a parent or caretaker fails to provide the child with adequate protection from harmful people or situations" (Coohey, 2003a, p. 149) and includes behaviors such as leaving

a child home alone, leaving the child with an unsuitable caretaker, or not watching a child closely enough (Coohey, 2003a). These behaviors are concerning given their association with unintentional but serious physical injuries (Cerovac & Roberts, 2000; Landen, Bauer, & Kohn, 2003; Scott, Higgins, & Franklin, 2012), and adolescent delinquent and substance use behaviors (Snyder & Merritt, 2015, 2016).

Correlates of child neglect are well-articulated within a small but growing body of research. Studies have focused on a range of correlates, including parent or child characteristics, parent-child interactions, and family factors such as economic resources and hardship (Slack et al., 2011; Stith et al., 2009). Recent work done by Seay and Kohl (2015) suggests a plausible pathway from maternal alcohol and other drug dependence and depression to parent neglect behaviors to subsequent child behavior problems. Fewer studies have examined correlates of supervisory neglect specifically (e.g., Coohey, 2003b; Freisthler, Johnson-Motoyama, & Kepple, 2014; Freisthler, Wolf, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2015; Jonson-Reid et al., 2013) and have typically emphasized parent characteristics around motivation, capacity, or opportunity (Coohey, 1998, 2003b). For example, parent capacity to problem-solve or relate to others in ways that are essential for appropriate child supervision may be impaired by parent alcohol misuse or depression while conditions such as economic hardship or social support may be associated with resources available to provide appropriate supervision for a child (Freisthler et al., 2014).

Theory on child maltreatment etiology provides a useful starting place for conceptualizing relationships between antecedent risk factors such as parent alcohol misuse and economic hardship, intermediate risk factors, and supervisory neglect occurrence. Belsky (1984, 1993) applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) to the problem of child abuse and proposed that maltreatment occurs within a context of factors at various levels of proximity to the child. Ecological systems theory uses the terms microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem to define these contexts. The microsystem includes the child's immediate family; the mesosystem, the child's surrounding community, and the macrosystem, the society within which the child lives. Each of these smaller systems is subsumed and influenced by the larger systems. Belsky (1984) expanded Bronfenbrenner's work to better account for the interplay across and between contextual levels, including the effect of the parent's own developmental process on parent-child interactions. Application of this work to child maltreatment research suggests that maladaptive parenting is likely a result of direct and indirect relationships between individual and social factors. Yet, only a small number of earlier studies have attempted to assess how these factors co-exist to create risk for supervisory neglect with no known studies assessing how key risk factors, such as parent alcohol misuse and economic hardship, indirectly increase risk for supervisory neglect behaviors. This study's premise is simple: to begin deconstructing how parent alcohol misuse (defined by heavy drinking behaviors) or economic hardship directly or indirectly produces risk for supervisory neglect. Fig. 1 shows the hypothesized relationships between these constructs that are subsequently discussed.

1.1. Potential pathways to supervisory neglect

Building on the arguments made by Belsky's (1984), we submit that the presence of mediating factors may interrupt, and better explain, the pathway from more distal characteristics. The current study focused on the direct and indirect effects of two predominant correlates of supervisory neglect that can influence parents' capacity (e.g., alcohol misuse) and opportunity (e.g., economic hardship) to ensure adequate supervision of their children.

1.1.1. Alcohol misuse to supervisory neglect. Parent alcohol misuse contributes to supervisory neglect because intoxication or other behaviors such as leaving home to purchase or drink alcohol may lead to failure to supervise children, failure to monitor their safety, or general lack of awareness around the child's health and well-being (see Fig. 1, Path B). A few studies have observed associations between parent alcohol misuse and supervision behaviors. For example, time spent with children was observed to be lower among parents with alcohol or other drug disorders compared to those not meeting criteria for alcohol or other drug disorders (Tartar, Blackson, Martin, Loeber, & Moss, 1993). Coohey (2008) observed positive bivariate relationships between inadequate supervision and alcohol or drug problems, clinical depression, cognitive disabilities, and problems with the law. In another study, parents reporting light drinking, moderate drinking, and occasional heavy drinking were associated with a higher likelihood of leaving a child home alone compared to non-drinkers; however, these effects were no longer significant when the model controlled for demographic characteristics, household income, perceived social support, and parenting stress (Freisthler et al., 2014). These earlier studies did not test parallel or indirect dynamics of relationships between these constructs and parental alcohol misuse.

It may be that correlates such as parental depression or social support may better explain the heterogeneity of behaviors observed across drinking behaviors, resulting in an indirect effect of alcohol misuse on supervision behaviors. For example, the behavioral effects of depression such as lethargy, hopelessness, and apathy may compound the effects of alcohol and influence the capacity for a parent to attend to their children (Coohey, 1998; see Paths A and F) and depression is highly prevalent among alcohol abusers (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2009), particularly women (Grant and Harford, 1995). The direction of relationship between alcohol misuse and depression is often debated in the literature. The self-medication hypothesis states that individuals with existing depressive symptoms use alcohol to relieve those symptoms and thus depression leads to increased alcohol misuse; however, the physiological mechanism of alcohol on brain chemistry suggests that a strict self-medication hypothesis is inaccurate (Kuhn, Swartzwelder, & Wilson, 2014). While some level of depressive symptoms may have instigated a drinking episode, drinking ultimately leads to greater depression. Supporting the physiological hypothesis that alcohol's depressive effects lead to depressed psychological symptoms (see Fig. 1, Path